

Geographic Identity Process and Ecodesign in Designesart

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Abstract – The Designesart Collection was created as part of the master’s program in Furniture and Interior Design at the Instituto Politécnico de Castelo Branco’s Escola Superior de Artes Aplicadas, Portugal. It is a product series that values inherent Beira Baixa’s territory and identity through its material, environment, society, symbols, and cultural heritage. How does Design embody value to this production? How is their geographic identity process? This paper explores the nature of designs or designing by understanding how it is influenced by aspects of territory, culture, and local materials and techniques. It answers both research questions through theoretical tools: identity and territorial process literature review, objects produced selection and analyses, and data articulation with theories and techniques. Therefore, we explain the importance of the relationship between Design and a local culture. The applied design method inverts the dynamics from global to local, paying attention to fundamental issues concerning the territories’ ecological and social concerns. The nine artifacts studied preserve and rehabilitate forgotten materials and techniques from the past, transmitted from generation to generation. Local identity and territory are central in the Design current panorama as a sustainable model of material culture and revitalization of a place history, transporting memories to the world through new objects.

Keywords – *Geography and Identity in Design, Local Culture, Ecodesign, Sustainable Manufacturing.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Identity constitutes "a representation of oneself," asserts Jean-François Staszak [1]. It is an ideology or a set of mental representations that a person or community develops about themselves in opposition to others. Hall [2] espouses a postmodern perspective of identity as a social and cultural construction continually shaped through cultural signification and representation systems in constant multiplication.

Meanwhile, Escobar [3] brings forward a new imaginary, which implies a rediscovery of human (and more than humans) identities. At the beginning of his book 'Design for the Pluriverse', he remembers the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale rubric 'Traces of the Past and Future Steps' and how objects, materials, spaces and places often carry personal and collective memories. This historical context reflects local traditions and societal values while adapting to contemporary needs and future challenges.

Later on, he intertwines in identity's affirmation "the right to the territory (as a space for the exercise of being), autonomy (the right to the conditions for the exercise of identity); the right to their own vision of the future, including the communities' right to choose their own model of development and economy according to their cosmology; and the right to historical reparations." The first of it _the right to the territory_ intrigued us.

How does design embody value in a geographic and identity production? What is its process? This paper explores the nature of design by understanding how territory, culture, local materials and techniques influence object production. It

addresses both research questions through theoretical tools: a literature review on identity and territorial concepts and processes, selection and analysis of objects, and theories and practices articulation.

Our chosen case study is the Designesart Collection, created as part of the master's program in Furniture and Interior Design at the Instituto Politécnico de Castelo Branco's Escola Superior de Artes Aplicadas, Portugal. After examining the five-year results, we selected nine objects that reflect and value Beira Baixa's inherent identity and territory. The examples provided a good foundation for a comparative analysis with observation of patterns, trends, and differences [4].

II. GEOGRAPHIC AND IDENTITY CONCEPTS

In his book 'Annales de Géographie,' Guy Di Meo [5] delves into the interdisciplinary nature of identity. He seeks to understand the relationship between society and territory, framing the term 'Territorial Identities.' He challenges identity's social, political, and philosophical domains, relating them with distinction, designation, affective, and symbolic issues.

Geograficidade, the space materiality, expresses the dialogical relationship of being in movement, coexisting in different places [6], structuring cosmologies, modulating the world comprehension and attitudes toward others, and affecting our understanding of globalization [7]. Moreover, through a humanistic and phenomenological perspective, there is also the concept of "local identity" [8] and *lugaridades* [6].

Dardel brings a different perspective when he explains geography beyond the dichotomy separating man and land. It

is seen as a complicity, a fundamental link of human experience on earth, an "irremediable, irrevocable link of geographical reality" [9]. Therefore, to this author, geography is not a generalist but more a human being extension [10].

Krenak, an indigenous leader, laments that 'we are so numbed by this destructive reality of consumption and entertainment that we have severed our connection with the living organism of the Earth [11]. It compels us to critically examine our relationship with the territory and the planet and prioritize a 'making' that combines technique, knowledge, work, and natural resources with an intention, driven by our needs, to generate sustainable solutions [12].

Designing a product with a geographical root means that it is intricately connected to landscape, territory, climate, materials, flora and fauna, language, values, societal myths and symbols. *Topos* is as vital as *logos* [5] or, as stated by Lia Krucken, designing presupposes a localized context (physically or virtually) and it requires understanding the interrelationships and dynamics in each locality [13]. It involves sharing knowledge with local communities and recognizing opportunities in creative processes.

Designing, as Gui Bonsiepe asserts, is not about camouflaging paradoxes and contradictions but about living with them and seeking to understand them [14]. The transversal nature of the design field and the crucial role of territory in its various layers underscore the urgency and relevance of this paper discussion. The territory is the ground and the basis of our work.

When speaking of territory, we are talking about one that a given population previously used or lived. "One makes the other [...]" [15], and one changes the other. Therefore, we embrace territories and identities as a response to accelerated and homogenizing globalization. Consequently, attention to identity and territory is necessary to rethink belonging, cultural production, and the role of design in these processes. Nevertheless, "How does Design embody value using local identity and territory?" and What is its process?

III. CREATING DESIGN GEOGRAPHIC AND IDENTITY OBJECTS

Results should be clear and concise. The most important features and trends in the results should be described but should not interpreted in detail.

We focused on the Beira Baixa region to answer the research questions. We analyzed the Designart Collection, a product series from the master's program in Furniture and Interior Design at the Instituto Politécnico de Castelo Branco's Escola Superior de Artes Aplicadas, Portugal. We delve into five collections that value Beira Baixa's inherent territory and identity through its material, environment, society, culture, symbols, and cultural heritage. We have chosen nine examples, characterizing a perspective that reflects the material and cultural context of the respective territory.

In this program, design is a tool to add value by enhancing local artefact identities, keeping memories, and fostering traditions, so it brings eco-consciousness. It can be called Ecodesign [16] because the products reflect an ancestral habit,

ritual, local technique, know-how, architectural feature, regional material, a gastronomic aspect, the landscape, customs, stories, myths, or legends of the region, present and past reality.

The program aims to foresee the possibility of recovering know-how and finding the context for designing new solutions. The central idea is to value local identities and retrieve them to contemporaneity by creating an artifact that supports its territory and simultaneously adapts to a new daily situation. They also pay attention to fundamental issues in the relationship with the territories' ecological concerns, not only environmentally speaking when using local materials, but also highlighting social aspects when the artifacts preserve memories and rehabilitate forgotten techniques from the past.

The design process is not arbitrary but based on rigorous ethnographic and anthropological research. Students, primarily Portuguese between 20-25 years old, started by studying the tangible and intangible manifestations of the territorial heritage. The research is the foundation of the product conception, ensuring that the objects are rooted in their cultural heritage. Thus, the initial phase involves a comprehensive contextualization of the chosen manifestation and a mood board that illustrates the symbols and materials at play. The subsequent phase focuses on object development through graphic records, which are then transformed into technical and visual studies and models that solidify the design options. Next is the prototype phase, where students produce solutions locally in small series. The collaborative approach fosters relationships with the local community and underscores the value of regional production. Subsequently, its packaging and product promotion.

Figure 1 brings some of the region's products: the musical instrument - the Adufe - played by women; various types of cheese and olive oil; the Beiroa guitar, which has a unique sound; different fruits such as cherries and various types of sweets. Some of them are familiar to the students who have them in their grandparent's home, and some are new and curious objects not present in their background.



Fig. 1. Beira-Baixa images. Source: Authors, 2024.

The first project is a children's game, fig. 2, which reinterprets Castelo-Branco embroideries, typically silk-embroidered quilts with various visual elements. It reclaims the visual elements, allowing children to create different compositions using stamps.



Fig. 2. Carimbos de Castelo Branco by Ana Alice Afonso. Source: Authors, 2024.

The following product, fig. 3 (left), aims to valorize a local product of the region – olive oil, facilitating its application in the context of the region's culinary culture. One of the culinary traditions in Beira Baixa is to toast bread and drizzle it with olive oil. It is a way to taste the quality of olive oil, improving its application through a cylinder that distributes the oil more evenly on the bread. The wood used is also from an olive tree.

The dosing syringes were designed to be used with fruit sweets from the region, adding value to a locally popular product. They allow for more precise and cleaner use, combining the ability to contain and apply the sweet in one object. The syringes have different-shaped tips (Fig. 3, right), allowing them to be used with different sweets.



Fig. 3. R'Olive by Ana Catarina Reis. Source: Authors, 2024 (left). Dulcis Syringes by Ana Simões. Source: Authors, 2024 (right).

The subsequent objects were designed to contain and air-dry whole tea leaves and spices, adding value to the abundant natural teas of the Beira-Baixa region. Natural fabrics allow air circulation among spices and tea leaves, resulting in natural drying, more careful storage, and longer preservation. As seen in Fig. 4 (left), their configuration allows for individual or group use of objects, forming columns of containers that also save space.

"Travia" is a unique cheese from Beira-Baixa. It is traditionally enjoyed with sweets and dried fruits, becoming one of the region's characteristic desserts. The "Travia" board, Fig. 4 (right), features a set of intersecting concavities, allowing for closer proximity between the foods it holds, facilitating their combination with the cheese. These intersections, with their contour lines, also allude to the region's rugged terrain.



Fig. 4. Jardim vertical by Carla Lourenço. Source: Authors, 2024 (left). Traval by Joana Santos. Source: Authors, 2024 (right).

This object resurrects an ancient legend that was once thought lost. It related to the identity of Beira-Baixa and Portugal, the story of the Lusitanian warrior – Viriato – who fought against the Romans and lived in a mountain range. The object, fig. 5 (left), brings this legend back to life, allowing the story to be passed down through generations so it will be remembered. As the story is told to children by grandparents or parents, a scenario changes to illustrate the different phases of the legend, allowing for interaction with the children.

Another children's object is the flying kite, which arises from the reinterpretation of a regional instrument called the "adufe." The object, Fig. 5 (right), utilizes the most distinctive features of the original instrument, reinterpreting them for a new purpose.



Fig. 5. Era uma vez by Tatiana Brás. Source: Authors, 2024 (left). Padufe by Ana Marques. Source: Authors, 2024 (right).

The Beira-Baixa region was once home to many textile factories in Portugal. Unfortunately, these factories no longer exist today. However, this object attempts to revive that practice and the type of fabric woven on looms. The object, Fig. 6 (left), is a picnic support, rolling up to contain the items needed for outdoor dining.

The last object is this whistle, Fig. 6 (right), intended for those who enjoy hiking and want to interact with the local wildlife. In this case, it allows interaction with a local bird – the Pisco. The sound is produced by rubbing a piece of metal against wood.



Fig. 6. Kitnic by Mauricio Ribeiros. Source: Authors, 2024 (left). Pisco by Patrícia Amaral. Source: Authors, 2024 (right).

IV. ANALYSING DESIGNART OBJECTS

The Designart Collection is an invitation to view the process and the territory consideration as equally important. This implies that the design process is a collective act, which starts by designing with and not just for local communities. It necessitates new competencies from the designer to operate in them and deal with their fluidity and complexity, acting as a 'creative facilitator.' To analyze the selected projects, we use the Krucken (2017) statement as presented in table 1.

Table 1 Comparative analyses of the Designart Collection

| Parameters | Projects | | | | | | | | |
|--|----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| Understand the project possibilities by comprehending context, needs, and potential users. | x | - | - | - | x | x | x | x | x |
| Promote the relationship with the place by strengthening the sense of belonging when valuing local traditions, rituals, and manifestations. | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Support the development of the solution together with the communities, valuing the "aesthetic and political potential of the place" and involving other implicated actors. | x | - | - | - | - | x | x | x | - |
| Rescue the visibility of a region's memory and identity. | x | x | - | x | x | x | x | x | x |

The examples highlighted almost all the crucial points because identity and territory were fundamental to the design process, raising political, socioeconomic, and cultural reflections. However, in half of them, there is a lack of codesign.

A community's understanding of its geography and identity is intricately tied to the collective knowledge passed down over generations. Therefore, the design process should integrate collaborative methodologies that include local knowledge, particularly in projects aiming to preserve or represent cultural heritage [17]. This integration enriches the design and empowers communities to maintain control over how their identity is shaped and represented in contemporary settings [18].

Therefore, all the projects could have been done and developed with the community, meaning the lack of

'conviviality' as Illich states [19] and 'companion species' as Haraway emphasises [20 and 21].

Illich chose this term to "designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I (the author) intend it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment." Convivial objects could lead to a convivial society that guarantees each member the right to identity and belong to a territory. It would reflect *sentipensar con la Tierra* – thinking and feeling with the Earth from Escobar [22] and the geographic and identity embodiment in the design process.

V. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Bringing design, identity, and territory closer together allows us to reflect more broadly on how those concepts relate to the sustainable design activity in its fundamentals. Our chosen case study, the Designer Collection, brought a product series that values Beira Baixa's inherent identity and territory through its materials, environment, symbols, and cultural heritage. The process behind the objects' development was clear.

However, the absence of traditional expertise in 55% of objects within a given cultural context represents a significant gap. The design process based on geography and identity should be collaborative, a process that urgently needs the community's traditional knowledge to be brought into its fold and that values and recognizes its society.

Nevertheless, contemplating the conceptions of territory and identity and their interrelations with various fields of knowledge from a perspective beyond their broad scope is a recurring theme in contemporary society. It is particularly true during an environmental crisis and in discussions between globalism and localism. The reflections from these concepts and their practical implications are of utmost importance for the design field.

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